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TRANS-SAHARAN TIES AND TENSIONS: MAGHREBI POLICY IN SAHELIAN WE--ETC(U)

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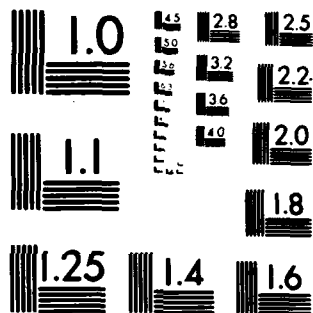
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TRANS-SAHARAN TIES AND TENSIONS:
MAGHREBI POLICY IN SAHELIAN WEST AFRICA

"The Sahara: Bridge or Barrier?" -- such was the title/query of William Zartman's early study of Maghreb-Sahel relations.¹ The query has been answered quite conclusively. The Sahara is now as it has been historically a bridge across which flow many influences -- political, economic, cultural, and religious. The "African Unity Highway" projected to link Algiers to Niamey is the contemporary form of the old routes traversed by soldiers and traders, missionaries and raiders. Then as now the ties that link North and West Africa produced conflict and tensions as well as opportunities for exchange and cooperation.

This paper examines the policy of four North African states -- Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya -- toward the Sahelian states stretching from Senegal and Mauritania to Chad. The issue dominating international relations in this Arab-African subsystem is the war in Western Sahara in which Algeria and Morocco have major stakes. The repercussions of this war have profoundly affected Mauritanian politics and have influenced policy in Senegal and Mali. A second theater of strife is of course the civil war in Chad where Libya's role has been a source of concern not only for the Saharan-Sahelian states but for all of West Africa. Philippe Decraene has recently referred to the "gigantic diplomatic match which is being played in West Africa."² Although the moves of the many players on this vast playing field are all interrelated, I shall summarize the policy initiatives of each of the four North African actors separately before analyzing the policy implications for the United States of this ensemble of regional interactions.

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Algeria

Algeria has pursued an active policy in West Africa (and sub-Saharan Africa at large) since the late 1950s, i.e. even prior to national independence.³ Indeed it has mounted an activist diplomacy in Third World affairs generally, and has sought in recent years to capitalize upon its leadership role to woo support for the Polisario Front and its goal of an independent state in ex-Spanish Sahara.

In the immediate West African theater, current Algerian policy is rooted in a strategy of cultivating trans-Saharan ties initiated in the mid-1960s. The initial centerpiece of this strategy was a policy of aid to Mauritania. Algeria supplied technical assistance in the training of police and internal security personnel and conducted frequent diplomatic consultations with Nouakchott. Ould Daddah, wary of Morocco, aligned himself increasingly with Algeria over the period 1966-1973. As the struggle for Western Sahara began to heat up in 1974, however, the Mauritanian president decided to accept King Hassan's offer to partition the Spanish territory, and threw in his lot with the Moroccans.

Outmaneuvered by Hassan on the western flank of the Sahel, the Algerians sought to improve their ties with Mali and Niger by instituting periodic summit meetings of the 'greater Sahara.' This policy, pursued in a competitive partnership with Libya, allowed Algeria to develop a working relationship with Generals Kountche and Traore, and to impress upon them the desirability of cooperation in dealing with their Tuareg populations. In Mali in particular, relations with the Tuareg people in the North has been a recurrent concern of the government in Bamako. Algeria exercises some influence over these populations, not only through its administration in Tamanrasset but through an emergency food distribution program that reaches the northern Malian population as well as the Algerian Tuaregs.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the beleaguered Traore government has been susceptible to Algeria's wooing. Thus at the most recent "Saharan summit" in Bamako last March (the fifth in a series dating back to the mid - 1970s), Algerian President Benjedid offered Mali aid in return for continued Malian cooperation on the Western Sahara issue. For some time, Mali has posed no objections to Polisario recruitment and freedom of movement in the northern Malian "corridor" to Mauritania. Moussa Traore furthermore is one of the members of the OAU Ad Hoc Committee on Western Sahara.*

Through the Saharan summits, therefore, Algeria has consolidated friendly relations with Niger and Mali under the guise of a common central Saharan policy. For the moment, Colonel Qaddafi appears to have laid aside this diplomatic instrument (he was absent from the Bamako meeting) in favor of a more ambiguous policy of informal relations with various Saharan clans traditionally recalcitrant to the central authority of the states across which they move. The precise contours of Qaddafi's possible Saharan ambitions are not at all clear, but one must assume that circumscribing Qaddafi is a factor in the calculations of Niger, Mali, and Algeria -- all the more so in light of the situation in Chad (about which more below).

Algeria broke diplomatic relations with Mauritania when President Ould Daddah entered the Moroccan camp. With his overthrow, the two states resumed their ties, Algeria seeking to encourage the gradual disengagement of Mauritania from the war. As Mauritania once again perceives a greater threat from Morocco than Algeria and desires to see some form of Sahraoui buffer state created, it would appear that

*In declining to attend the Committee's December 1979 session, Morocco cited the Malian president's lack of objectivity as one of its reasons for staying home.

Algero-Mauritanian interests will coincide in the near future. So long as the Algerians can avoid stirring up old grievances about condescension toward their Mauritanian ally, the former Nouakchott-Alger tie should re-emerge.

Algero-Senegalese relations remain, as they have long been, marked by a measure of mutual respect and a measure of mutual distrust. As a general rule Algiers and Dakar come down on opposite sides of inter-African and global issues, but each respects the other's influence. President Senghor worries about Algerian ambitions in the Sahelian region, and rallied to the Moroccan-Mauritanian cause in 1975. Algeria lacks the direct geopolitical leverage upon Senegal that it has upon Mali and Mauritania. It seeks therefore to maintain "correct" relations with Senghor's government with the goal of mitigating Morocco's greater influence in Dakar.

Does Algeria have "hegemonic aims" in the Sahel as is periodically asserted in Senegal? There is no doubt that Algeria is an ambitious, activist state with a vision of progressivism in Africa as a whole. It has usually tempered its vision with a strong dose of realism, however; its current policies are dominated by its dispute with Morocco, and its initiatives in the Sahel are designed to isolate Morocco diplomatically. The Sahel poses no threat to Algeria whereas the conflict with Morocco does. Rather than hegemony, Algeria is seeking sufficient influence in the Sahel to keep Morocco under strain.

Morocco

Moroccan policy toward the Sahel is equally dominated by the conflict over Western Sahara. Morocco of course seeks recognition of its claim to legitimate sovereignty over the contested territory. It has pursued a policy of moral and material aid to African moderates from Senegal to Zaire in its effort to rally

support for what it sees as the recovery of its southern provinces. Moroccan relations with black Africa have always been somewhat complicated by its Saharan irredenta. Morocco's refusal to recognize Mauritania until 1969 was a diplomatic albatross limiting Rabat's audience in continental affairs. It sought with some success however to exploit the common ties of Islam and political moderation in forging diplomatic alliances. The Grand Mosque in Dakar is one tribute to this policy.

So long as Mauritania was allied with Morocco, Rabat enjoyed some local sanction for its policy goal. Mauritania's effort to extricate itself has since induced considerable tension between the two states subsequent to Moroccan annexation of Tiris el Gharbia. More generally Morocco has lost ground politically in Africa where opinion has swung more and more in favor of self-determination for the Sahraouis. Only four African governments, for example, voted with Morocco in last December's U.N. vote on Western Sahara (Senegal, Gabon, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea). As noted above, Hassan boycotted the OAU subcommittee meeting. Morocco's policy in West Africa as elsewhere is thus to do its best to stem the tide of adverse opinion. One salvo in a renewed public relations campaign is found in the May 28, 1980 issue of Jeune Afrique in which Morocco has sponsored a 32 page special supplement defending its case. Because Senegal has been more wary of Algerian influence than of Moroccan expansion in the greater Sahara-Sahelian region, the Rabat-Dakar axis has held firm. Yet unless Senghor is willing to feed Mauritanian fears of dismemberment he may have to ease away from total support of Rabat in the direction of a negotiated settlement -- for the sake of overall regional stabilization.

To summarize, Morocco's policy is essentially a diplomatically defensive one. It has had to react to the effective campaign mounted by Algeria in behalf of Polisario and self-determination. It will exploit fears of an alleged Soviet-backed radical thrust into Africa as best it can, but otherwise it has limited diplomatic leverage in the region beyond the Senegalese tie.

Tunisia

Tunisia has always been more oriented to the Mediterranean than to black Africa, and now is being increasingly drawn into Arab world affairs by virtue of the shift of Arab League headquarters to Tunis. Its African initiatives are modest alongside these interests, but Bourguiba has seen the francophone tie as a link worth preserving. Tunisia has thus sought to maintain cultural ties with West Africa, especially with Senegal. Tunis is concerned to maintain its independent identity -- all the more so after the Gafsa episode -- vis-a-vis its larger neighbors. Friendly relations with Africa, and notably with other governments uneasy about Libyan objectives in the continent, serve Tunisia's interest as does the assumption of broad Third World responsibilities such as the chairmanship of the Group of 77 (ably exercised by Ambassador Mestiri in New York in 1978-79 for example). Tunisia nonetheless remains a modest regional actor, its interests largely defined by the desire to exert some countervailing influence to Libya.

Libya

Libya does see itself as a trans-Saharan power. It has become increasingly involved in the Western Saharan war through arms deliveries to Polisario. It is generally believed in Algeria, Niger, and Mali that President Qaddafi nurses a scheme of a vast confederation of Saharan clansmen, a devoutly Muslim force that would be antonomous of the existing governments but sympathetic to the Libyan

revolution. Qaddafi's propensity to seek to influence events beyond Libya is well known. Whether his Saharan aspirations are anything more than pipedreams remains to be seen; on the other hand, it is clear that Libya is a significant factor in the civil war in Chad.

Libya has long been involved in the struggle for power in Chad. It originally supported FROLINAT as a lever to influence the government of Former President Tombalbaye. When the latter broke with Israel, Libya eased its pressure but continued to cultivate contacts with various leaders in Chad's faction-ridden politics. With the fall of Tombalbaye's successor, Felix Malloum, in March 1979, Libya concurred in supporting a provisional government led by Goukouni Woddeye, a Frolinat leader rival to Hissene Habre, the other main contender for power whom Libya particularly wished to block.

Libya's relations with Frolinat had nonetheless become increasingly embittered in the latter 1970s and Libya continued to maneuver to bring a pro-Libyan regime to power in N'Djamena. Libyan attacks against Habre's forces in the disputed Aouzou Strip were reported in April 1979 and again in June; these operations in the North intensified the rivalry between Habre and Woddeye. At the same time, Libya was supplying arms to Colonel Kamougue in the South over which the central government had no control. This anarchic situation led to an international conference in August (the fourth since March 1979) which produced a new "provisional national unity government" led by Woddeye and composed of four major factions. The Foreign Minister in this government was Ahmet Acyl, head of the "Revolutionary Democratic Council" and of a coalition called the Common (or Joint) Action Front (FAC), who is characterized as pro-Libyan. Charges by Ahmat Acyl against Hissene Habre triggered the most recent resumption of Chad's seemingly interminable civil war.

When a state collapses as has happened in Chad, all its neighbors are likely to intervene in one manner or another. Both Nigeria and Sudan have been involved in trying to stabilize the situation in a manner compatible with their interests. Libya appears to be the most deeply involved of all the border states and seems the most intent to manipulate Chad's internal cleavages to its benefit. Libyan involvement has been so great that the fear of an outright Libyan invasion was a major concern at the Franco-African summit in May 1980.⁴ I would venture that Libya has been seeking the liquidation of Habre's forces in the current round of strife, an outcome which it would like to achieve without an invasion.

Whatever one's speculation for the moment, it is evident that Libya having already reached out into Ugandan politics and elsewhere in Africa will continue to manipulate the instruments at hand to achieve a pro-Libyan government in N'Djamena. Coupled with its presumed willingness to sow the seeds of dissidence in Tunisia and in the Sahara, Libyan policy is more than a thorn in the sides of her neighbors. Libya of course has the financial means to pursue these revisionist policies; nor is Qaddafi without a measure of ideological influence stemming from his fundamentalist anti-westernism. Yet none of Chad's other neighbors, most notably Nigeria and Sudan, desires a deep extension of Libyan power, any more than Algeria, Niger, or Mali wishes a Saharan insurrection. These constitute counter-vailing forces providing a shaky regional equilibrium. France furthermore remains an actor in the balance.

Policy Implications and Conclusions

The key actor in this regional subsystem is Algeria. The United States must therefore be concerned with what concerns Algeria, and this first and foremost is the Western Sahara. American ability to check the expansion of Libyan influence is

to some extent dependent upon Algeria. The Libyan-Algerian relationship has always been ambivalent, their mutual cooperation in some domains being circumscribed by Algerian reservations about other of Qaddafi's policies. The current situation with regard to the Polisario Front is exemplary. Both countries have backed Polisario. As the "frontline" state Algeria has been the most prominent supporter, but Libya has gradually increased its military shipments to the guerrilla force. Libya has thus moved into a position in which it might choose to take Polisario under its wing in the unlikely event that Algeria should drop it. Libyan support of Polisario is in other words not an unmitigated blessing from Algeria's point of view. Similarly the recent Libyan involvement in the Gafsa uprising entailed some embarrassment for the Algerian government.* There is reason to assume, therefore, that Algeria is sufficiently wary of Libya's regional aspirations to seek an overall stabilization of the region. Furthermore Algeria is experiencing a wave of internal political and economic strains (the Berber issue, allegations of mishandling of funds, stalemate over future economic policy). Benjedid may conclude that an acceptable settlement in Western Sahara is in his interest. Compromise for the sake of stabilization is not out of the question.

Stabilization of the turbulent situation is also in the American interest. The war in Western Sahara does not serve any American interest. On the contrary it jeopardizes two states with both of which we have an interest in friendly relations. It invites further external intervention. The question is not whether the United States should be seeking a negotiated settlement of this conflict, but

*A few Algerians allegedly including Slimane Hoffman were accomplices in the infiltration operation, apparently without Benjedid's knowledge.

rather how it should be going about this. The task requires a concerted effort to identify the parameters of a compromise. It would be foolish to oversimplify the nature of this task, but it seems unwise to assume that the task is impossible. To be sure neither side appears willing to give very much: Hassan wants the territory and has a major political stake in it; Algeria can afford to underwrite Polisario's war effort so long as it continues to inflict costly losses on the Moroccan army. Yet again both sides do have an interest in cutting their costs if they can do so without political humiliation.

Clearly no solution is possible without Morocco's yielding some part of the territory that it occupied subsequent to the Spanish and Mauritanian withdrawals. In theory the territory would be yielded to international supervision (OAU or UN?) pending a self-determination referendum; in practice Morocco would have to be prepared to relinquish the territory to an independent entity (RASD/Polisario) in the event that the vote favored independence. Presumably the bulk of the current refugee population would have to be entitled to vote, a condition that would make an outcome other than independence unlikely; otherwise it is difficult to see how Polisario could accept the scheme.

If Morocco were willing (could be persuaded) to contemplate yielding a portion of its irredenta, the next question is how much (or how little) would Algeria deem reasonable. Algeria might well insist that the plebiscite must cover the entire disputed territory; if so it would undoubtedly be necessary to discover some further formula which would give Morocco the opportunity to win in some part of the territory. The calculations become rather byzantine at this point. As in any negotiation, success would turn upon the political desire of all parties to find a formula that would humiliate no party. For the moment one can only speculate that

Algeria would be flexible once Morocco indicated its willingness to settle for less than 100%.

Polisario would be hard pressed to oppose an arrangement which Algeria was prepared to accept. Yet Polisario is not devoid of bargaining power of its own in light of the Libyan connection. This then constitutes a constraint upon Algeria. One would have to assume, however, that at some point Algeria would be willing to argue to Polisario that this was the best that could be had.

The speculation in this "scenario" may prove unrealistic. Yet the active pursuit of peace in this region is in the American interest. So long as the fighting continues, the region is prone to even larger scale conflict which entails numerous threats to the United States. The Carter Administration has characterized the United States arms sale to Morocco as a bargaining chip. Ways of cashing in the chip must be explored much more persistently than they appear to have been in the past. King Hassan might be influenced by the argument that Moroccan policy is currently playing into the hands of a Libyan pan-Saharan scheme which the United States, Morocco, and Algeria all share an interest in containing.

Cooling down the threat of war between Algeria and Morocco would help to calm fears in the western Sahel by diffusing tensions and by relaxing the pressure for alignments in the region. It would not have much impact on the other troublespot at the eastern end of the Sahel. The tragedy in Chad is of grave concern to all the border states. The United States can be most helpful here by encouraging the efforts of the African conciliators to set up a stable coalition. So long as any faction -- pro-Libyan or otherwise -- sees an interest in prolonging the strife, Chad will remain ungovernable if not anarchic. African states themselves have

the greatest interest in restoring order to the country by bringing pressure upon the feuding parties. The United States can only support their efforts.

In northwest Africa as well, whatever efforts the United States may initiate should be undertaken in conjunction and cooperation with the Ad Hoc Committee of the OAU. The OAU remains the organization best suited to sanction a settlement of this final Saharan decolonization issue. Contrary to Chad, however, the United States by virtue of its arms supply to Morocco and its extensive trade relations with Algeria is substantially involved in the Western Sahara dispute. Here we are capable of helping the adversaries to resolve their differences.

Notes

1. Internation Concilation, 541, 1963.
2. Le Monde, April 13 - 14, 1980
3. For background on Algeria's African policy, see Robert A. Mortimer, "The Algerian Revolution in Search of the African Revolution," The Journal of Modern African Studies, 8, 3 (1970).
4. Jeune Afrique, May 21, 1980.